

## Cultural Re(production) in Maruxa Vilalta's *Pequeña historia de horror (y de amor desenfrenado)*

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Since the mid-1960s, Maruxa Vilalta has been recognized by critics as a leading Latin American dramatist who consistently challenges herself by exploring new dramatic options that fit thematic constants in her texts. Namely, she has focused her plays on conflictive human relationships that lead to social decay, human isolation, and selfishness. Her 1984 drama *Pequeña historia de horror (y de amor desenfrenado)* is no exception. Here she explores social conflicts through cultural (re)production, calling into question not only the validity of the play itself as a theatrical version of *Susanna and the Elders*, but also the collective impact of all cultural references included therein. Vilalta explores the value of artistic production in varying contexts, while employing Bertolt Brecht's techniques for epic theatre to the extreme. She creates distance between the spectator and actors, thereby further questioning all cultural production and consumption. According to Tamara Holzapfel, Vilalta goes beyond Brecht's *verfremdungseffekte* by taking "on a new strangeness. It is in this sense that Vilalta's achievements in the theatre can best be understood" (18). In *Pequeña historia*, the reader is forced to accept that this is a (re)production of other cultural manifestations and a work of art as well. Vilalta presents a complex, decayed microcosm where the characters are void of authenticity due to their passive reproduction of cultural icons, having lost their humanity in that repetitive process. Because the play goes beyond the mere referencing of other cultural products, an intertextual analysis provides only a partial understanding of the relationships here established. Gérard Genette's idea of *transtextuality* is therefore suited for this study given that he incorporates intertextuality as one of the five ways to understand the relationship between a text and its cultural references. For Genette, intertextuality is limited to the relationship of two or more texts,

whereas transtextuality incorporates that idea along with the following: paratextuality (the context surrounding the production of a text and the details external to the main body of the text); metatextuality (the relationship with a portion of a text even if it is not overtly mentioned); architextuality (generic connections made with other texts through titles or other means); and hypertextuality (the relationship between two texts where the hypertext alters the original hypotext without commenting on it). In general, the overall effect of the different types of textual relationships is that one text, in this case Vilalta's play, ultimately lead the reader to think about all the referenced texts in a different light. We shall come back to this more comprehensive idea of transtextuality as we study the cultural (re)productions of *Pequeña historia* along with their social implications.

From the initial stage directions, *Pequeña historia* becomes a type of ironic re-enactment of the painting *Susanna and the Elders*, a re-enactment that questions the effectiveness of cultural (re)production and the use of our own appropriation of cultural manifestations. Through the metatextual and hypertextual relationships created, Vilalta presents only the elders in her play given the hopeless environment shown where murder triumphs. The same is true for Chopin's *Polonaise Heroic*, also noted in the initial stage directions as the first piece one hears. Initially, it is simply Chopin's masterpiece brought on stage, but it is transformed as the play progresses and ultimately represents death. Similar decaying transformations occur with other cultural manifestations, including the Mexican pop icon El Monje Loco, the vanguard artist Marcel Duchamp, and the folkloric figure of La Llorona, who is sometimes connected to la Malinche. Given these multiple cultural references, as well as Vilalta's sophistication, *Pequeña historia*, demands a more engaged reader who must decipher the meaning of the sadistic crudeness, powerful hatred, triumphant oppression, and sexual extremes. Such self-centered human decay ultimately leads to collective destruction; anyone can be a sexual provider just as easily as a disposable obstacle. Vilalta's manipulation of cultural (re)production is a crucial detail ignored by critics until now. Hers is a postmodern drama that dialogues with the cultural products it (re)creates, demanding a more general questioning of all cultural consumption and (re)production despite the referencing to artistic gems. An appreciation for Vilalta's brilliance from a transtextual perspective begins by looking at the art referenced in her drama.

As noted, the initial stage directions call attention to the furnishings and colors of an old, decrepit London house. That physical space echoes

various classical renditions of *Susanna and the Elders*, including versions painted by Tintoretto and Rembrandt. Even though the play only mentions these two specific versions of the hypotext, Vilalta's hypertext forces the reader or spectator to reinterpret all versions of *Susanna and the Elders*. Just like the elders from the biblical story or the paintings, Jonathan enters a closed environment, Mildred's private home, as an intruder with the sole purpose of satisfying his sexual desire. He is moved by Mildred's physical beauty and lusts, just like the elders, to have sex with her: "¡Una noche de amor desenfrenado!" (111). As the play progresses, Jonathan will want to repeat with Mildred his wedding night and the murder of his wife Margaret. Again, violent human behavior reproduces itself, spreading its destruction and hatred. In the original story, Susanna, who refused to sexually satisfy the old judges, is condemned to death by them. Of course, Daniel intervenes in that version and saves her through divine intervention, which allows him to prove her innocence and sentence the judges to death for their blasphemy. Apparently, her honor and faith in God saved her; she upholds traditional Christian values that protect her life. On the other hand, both Tintoretto and Rembrandt's versions use red, black, and shades of sepia to hide the elders in the garden. Those colors contrast vividly with the brightness of the voluptuous female nude used in each painting. In the biblical story, Susanna's whiteness is connected to her honor and moral values. This theme continues in the paintings, but it is also an excuse to highlight a beautiful female nude. The contrast emphasizes the separation between the voyeurs and Susanna's innocent beauty. Both Tintoretto and Rembrandt are alluded to in Jonathan's final soliloquy prior to the murders that echo Vilalta's own dramatic recreation of the story, highlighting, once again, its transtextuality. In Vilalta's rendition, however, all references to light or whiteness are negative. On the one hand, this must be so because there is no authenticity within the confines of the theatre and its characters. On the other, the play will end by demanding that the reader/spectator finish the work of art. Hope can only come into this play in the form of the reader/spectator's reaction to this manifestation of human decay.

In its (re)production, we have before us an artistic creation that exaggerates social behaviors referenced in other texts, transforming them into metaphors of real human interactions, just as Hoeg found in *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto*: "Así que por reflejar, distorsionar y exagerar los rasgos de la vida real, lo representado en las acotaciones llega a ser metáfora de la realidad" (39). Indeed, it is through metaphoric cultural (re)production that

the reader must make sense of this play. When Jonathan is finally alone with Mildred, referring to her as Margaret, he explains how he murdered his wife and was then once again able to see other colors: “Con ella muerta, doctor, en la habitación había otra vez armonía [...]. Pero viéndola, ya pude pensar en otros colores, no nada más el blanco. Pensé, doctor, es curioso, pensé en Susana y los viejos. Pensé en Rembrandt y en Tintoretto y casi todos los colores eran dorados y ocre, con algún tono de rojo y bastante negro” (Vilalta 127). The reference is to Rembrandt and Tintoretto, it could have been to versions done by Gentileschi or Ruben, among others. What is important is that the reference underscores the effect of cultural reproduction and cements the transtextual relationships. The reader is forced to think about the use of color in past renditions of *Susanna and the Elders* and how it relates to Jonathan’s ability in this play. Vilalta herself is (re)producing the same piece through her play, using the original biblical passage to satirize cultural production, traditional representation of different colors, and their ethical implications.

In other words, Vilalta’s play, read as a more modern dramatic recreation of *Susanna and the Elders*, makes adultery, voyeurism, and female chastity irrelevant; rather, sexual desire is presented as an exclusively instinctive pursuit, the consequences of which are brought to the forefront. The reader is confronted with the reality that humans who reproduce cultural icons are condemned to mindlessly repeat; they represent newer versions that do not guarantee an improvement in human relations and, in this case, only passively reproduce human decay. There is no Daniel here who steps in to save Susanna; rather, all the characters in the play are exclusive versions of the “elders.” Furthermore, the choice to work with this particular cultural icon is not arbitrary; it is a well-known piece that was redone many times from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries allowing artist to highlight a beautiful and voluptuous female nude while interpreting the role of the elders in many ways. In Vilalta’s drama, we know from the initial explicit stage directions that the furniture pieces are antiques with accent items such as carpets, curtains and rugs in red, black and dark sepia. Jonathan, the intruder, enters this closed space attracted by Mildred, the ambiance, and the piano. Thus the background or general stage directions reflect the content of the paintings, thereby establishing a broader transtextual dialogue with all cultural products.

What is curious about Vilalta’s modern version is the total lack of whiteness as a positive symbol. There is a shift in the traditional representation of white as the color of purity, beauty, and honor that is absolutely void in this play. When Jonathan and Mildred meet, he points out that she has been

exhibiting herself for him and that he is attracted to women dressed in white: “Tengo predilección por las mujeres vestidas de blanco” (87). Rather than showing the biblical Susanna’s modesty, here both Margaret and Mildred enjoy exhibiting themselves and having sex. In other words, both are women who like to dress in white, but neither follows traditional values. Jonathan has come to the house attracted by Mildred, who undresses every night in front of a large window facing the street. We learn that she has murdered her husband Charles with cyanide because he is chubby and his hands sweat: “Charles era gordito y le sudaban las manos... Por eso lo maté” (103). Mildred also claims that, through her imagination, a stuffed purple Persian cat rapes her nightly and she enjoys it. Nightly she undresses, leaving her white gown on the floor, in front of the large living room window. Regarding Mildred’s behavior, Vilalta explains in an interview that this is not female sexual liberation but rather an abnormality: “A Mildred no vamos a ponerla como prototipo de la mujer liberada; es una mujer anormal” (Morales 74). Whiteness is obscene in this play because it symbolizes a purity completely lacking in the characters’ behavior. In fact, Jonathan kills Mildred as he murdered his wife Margaret on their wedding night, for being a “putita vestida de blanco” (90). Margaret confesses to her new husband on that same night that she has had many sexual partners and claims that she is only telling him this because she believes he is sufficiently civilized: “Te lo conté porque pensé que eras civilizado” (126). To this Jonathan responds that she confuses civilization with having an orgasm: “Confundía la civilización con el orgasmo” (126). Jonathan and Margaret are seemingly talking to each other on their wedding night, yet they are clearly incapable of reaching one another through language. It is not the case that they are producing nonsensical sentences, as in the absurd theatre of Eugene Ionesco or others like him. Here it is more the case that oral enunciations are hollow; they are not heard nor do they produce communication. For Latin American art and letters in particular, this is a crucial allusion because we have since the 19<sup>th</sup> century an established dichotomy between civilization and barbarism that continues up to the present. After the independence movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Latin American intellectuals favored and valued foreign cultural products over national ones. This play criticizes that tradition by placing the Mexican protagonists within an old house in London. The location of the home in Europe does not guarantee better or more civilized human interactions. In fact, the characters’ behavior in that closed space totally negates the idea of the loving, safe home environment; there is no hope to be found. Vilalta obviously mocks these old

prejudices that favored Western cultural production.

As with Mildred, it is Margaret's grotesque whiteness that inspires Jonathan to murder her:

Ahora que ya amaneció voy a decírtelo, Margaret: ese color blanco era ofensivo. Yo habría preferido cualquier otro color, cualquiera menos el blanco... Margaret, primero el vestido y después tu piel blanca y ahora bajo ella corren los gusanos blancos también, lechosos, ¿no es cierto, Margaret?, sígueme contando. De todos éstos que lo mismo que yo tu cuerpo con sus manos tocaron, Margaret, soy masoquista, sígueme contando... De veras no me importaría si no fuera porque tu piel transparente y blanca... (*Ríe; se dirige a un espectador.*) Doctor: si Margaret hubiera sido morena, no la habría matado. (125)

Having confirmed her sexual promiscuity to her husband on their wedding night, Margaret pays for that honest confession with her life: "Ya sabía que no ibas a poder soportarlo, anda, dilo de una vez, dime que ahora que sabes que me acosté con todos ellos no vas a poder soportarlo" (126). Jonathan cannot tolerate her confession and uses it as an excuse to kill her. The sickly Mexican characters of this play express old and new ideas about civilization that hinder their ability to connect spiritually with one another or to create more humane, loving relationships. After assassinating his wife Margaret on their wedding night, Jonathan is once again able to see beauty and color. Yet this ability only highlights his perverse cultural values. He is offended by Margaret's whiteness all the way down to the color of her skin and the white worms that consume her dead body. Despite the whiteness of her dress, her attire is indeed a deteriorated symbol of the bride's chastity.

Both Margaret and Mildred's sexual behavior is instinctual, void of interest in love or other human emotions; they adopt this behavior to achieve their self-serving goals. We know that once Jonathan kills Margaret, he is able to see color, the colors used by Rembrandt and Tintoretto in their renditions of *Susanna and the Elders*. The problem with Jonathan is that he views violence as more authentic and aesthetic, when his cruelty is the darkest aspect of the play. In fact, Vilalta's rendition of *Susanna and the Elders* is mostly dark; her innovative transformation of whiteness only highlights human decay. Furthermore, as Magnarelli points out, there is a disconnect between violence and language: *Pequeña historia* "focuses on what might have been a rather trite soap opera but which becomes poetic depiction of the oppression and violence which underline sexual relations, or perhaps simply human relations, and the language we use to disguise that aggression

and violence” (109). Feeling himself too conventional with classical art, Jonathan quickly moves from the classical to the modern, specifically Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*: “me sentí como convencional, me molestó ser tan ‘clásico’ y mejor me dediqué a pensar en Marcel Duchamp y su ‘Desnudo bajando la escalera’” (127). But that shift does not mean he becomes more humane. Duchamp was a key proponent of Dada, and like Vilalta he was moved by the avant-garde artistic movement and the search for more authentic cultural products. As an innovative artist, Duchamp also used brown and black in his piece to create a body made of cylindrical shapes, which creates the illusion of movement in its static reproduction. Here again, Jonathan’s appreciation for this modern cubist piece does not save him from becoming totally deformed in his cruelty. Through Duchamp, Vilalta shifts from a classic representation of an innocent, nude Susanna who is victim of the elders to an abstract nude that can only make sense in the viewer’s imagination. This is the author’s innovative call to her spectators and readers to do the same with *Pequeña historia*, to make sense of her more complex depiction of *Susanna and the Elders*. Only in her readers’ imagination can this darker version of Tintoretto and Rembrandt’s pieces bring light to social strife. Such a focus makes sense, given the fact that Vilalta produced this piece during the Mexican economic crisis of the 1980s. Vilalta seeks to respond to social injustice, seeing politics and greed at the root of all social dysfunction: “De un modo u otro, mi teatro ha estado siempre influido por la política, como preocupación, como pasión...” (Peralta 46). Political corruption leads to more serious social injustices, which is precisely what Vilalta criticizes in her drama: “Me refiero a la concepción de la obra de arte como instrumento de crítica social a la vez que autoexpresión y objeto estético” (98). In *Pequeña historia*, the strangeness of deformed human behavior is the key to understanding Vilalta’s social protest, along with the role played by cultural products in shaping that behavior.

Thus, as Jonathan himself states, Margaret’s whiteness is offensive to him just as the total lack of humanity in this play is shocking to the reader. In relation to Vilalta’s representation of *Susanna and the Elders*, the play exclusively uses darker colors, images, and behaviors, which is a call to contemplate human values and the possibility that some goodness, some compassion should still be possible. That hope is left to the reader or spectator, who must make sense of this perverse experience. Vilalta herself calls this play a cruel rite, with Jonathan as the most violent character: “en los pasajes más poéticos de Jonathan, y en todo este personaje, aun en los momentos



en que la acción física es prácticamente inexistente, hay mucha violencia, una violencia mucho más fuerte que el hecho de amenazar a alguien con un puñal o una pistola" (Morales 74). In Vilalta's rendition, all the characters resemble the "elders" and there is a general decay that stems from their brutality. Whereas the biblical Susanna holds her honor as the highest good, Mildred, Williams, Aunt Emily, and especially Jonathan seek immediate physical satisfaction and nothing more. He has entered Mildred's house with the specific intention to have sex with her. There are no contrasts in this play, unlike Tintoretto or Rembrandt's rendition of *Susanna and the Elders*, where there is a stark contrast between the brightness of the female body and the darkness that surrounds the old men. Rembrandt's elders look on with a more subtle desire than Jonathan's outright demand for sex. The complete darkness in Vilalta's rendition leaves the contemplation of distorted human behavior unresolved. The lack of Susanna's noble values or of Daniel's rescue is exactly the problem in a world where compassion and honor are nonexistent.

In the same light, rather than maintain its complexity and beauty, Vilalta cheapens Chopin's *Polonaise Heroic* when Jonathan's wife Margaret uses it as a status symbol to uphold herself as a refined member of Mexican bourgeois society; this is the only musical piece she knows and the only one she requests in social gatherings. Meanwhile, Jonathan is an accomplished pianist who learns to detest this piece when it is used to presume a false but heightened cultural awareness. It was his favorite piece until his wife denigrated its beauty. Thus, the reproduction and misuse of Chopin's piece throughout the play becomes symbolic of cultural decay; a lovely composition is consumed as a materialist good whose only purpose is to "buy" social status. Jonathan complains about this in the final soliloquy directed at the audience: "primero que nada –los conocimientos de mi mujer en música eran más bien elementales. Naturalmente yo habría preferido cierta cultura, cierta sensibilidad, cierto estilo... pero no. Elementales... En realidad lo de la boda, doctor, ella lo organizó solita" (125). Chopin's musical composition also brings circularity to the play; it opens the play and is the last melody we hear after Jonathan has murdered everyone in the house. Artistic production, when created for prosaic purposes, is useless in positively affecting the human condition. Once Jonathan has killed all the characters in the play, he turns once again to the audience, saying: "Señores del jurado, he vuelto a matarla. Señores del jurado, los conocimientos de mi mujer en música eran más bien elementales" (131). The play ends with Jonathan leaving the decrepit house



and the murdered bodies, while humming the *Polonaise*. His final words are “Tengo hambre” (132). This obscene comment after his cold murder of three individuals is a striking example of human degeneration.

Chopin’s original piece becomes grotesque when it is repeated, without concern for its musical intricacies, as a symbol of wealth used by the bourgeois to demonstrate false worldly erudition. The same occurs with all cultural (re) productions in this play. Bearse and Roses see this as a result of the characters’ “bourgeois social behavior on the one hand and North American pecuniousness and false optimism, on the other” (404). The circular nature of the play also underlines the lack of growth or change in human behavior, which transforms art into a meaningless product to be consumed for purposes other than beauty or contemplation of the human condition. The sick characters lack humanity, compassion, love, and kindness; lunacy as a destructive, violent force is supposedly the reason behind their behavior. Chopin’s piece is a musical battle of sorts; although it is sophisticated from a musical perspective, the mere repetition of it in this play as a symbol of both high culture and death devalues it completely. Its repetition in the context of different murders destroys its beauty, converting it into kitsch. Just as so many other cultural clichés have lost their meaning, Vilalta’s rendition of *Susanna and the Elders* shows this same cultural erosion despite its long tradition as art.

Supposedly both Jonathan and Mildred’s craziness motivates their selfishness, yet there are two more characters in the house who serve as mere archetypes: “El mayordomo y tía Emily, arquetipos” (Morales 74). The play begins with the butler Williams pretending to be El Monje Loco, a character inspired by Mexican radio theatre since 1932. El Monje Loco was apparently a monk condemned to live in his dark tower for having a forbidden love. Although the combination of monk and lunacy fit well into this play, again there is a re-presentation of a cultural icon in a deformed state. Williams comes from a family of butlers. He is the epitome of passive cultural consumption, as he only knows and repeats what he sees on television. As we learn that Williams the butler was Charles’ lover, we also find out that he has become heterosexual in order to satisfy Mildred’s sexual desires, with the intent of obtaining Charles’s inheritance. His distinguishing feature in the play is a macabre laughter that he learned from television. In fact, both his cultural understanding and social behavior replicate what he sees on the screen. When asked if he has read Shakespeare, his response is immediate: “¡No! Veo la televisión.” Same with the radio: “Desde luego que no; no hay

imagen. Uuuuuuuuuuu... Mayordomo, pero no pendejo" (114). The main problem with Williams is that he lacks authenticity and only repeats what he watches on television. This is the exact same general criticism made by Vilalta: deformed cultural copies that lack a critical approach are destructive. She has a personal dislike for television, which she confesses to Peralta in an interview: "Porque soy muy rebelde. En televisión, cuando me han llamado, me han pedido 'cosas' sobre medida, como a un sastre. No me han dado la libertad que quisiera. En cambio, en el teatro no tengo restricciones" (44). Williams is not only the household servant, but also a metaphorical servant of consumerist culture, unable to think or act on his own. He is clearly a by-product of the uncritical, cultural consumption that Vilalta wishes to criticize here. *El Monje Loco* originated from a Mexican radio show, but by 1953 there was a comic book series and then various television shows. Williams as *El Monje Loco* becomes another piece of Vilalta's architextuality; as an archetype, he becomes connected to all past versions of *El Monje Loco* through the superficiality of his behavior and the two-dimensionality of his predictable archetype as well.

Pop culture is brought into the play through Williams' inability to behave beyond the models provided for him through television. In fact, his greatest fear arises when Jonathan and he discuss varying outcomes for his possible crimes and Jonathan points out that he too could be a murder victim. According to Jonathan, great artists and killers act on great inspiration. He wants Williams to find his interior ability in order to imagine himself as a great killer. Williams is incapable of originality and ends up temporarily pushed out of the house against his will. Incapable of responding on his own, he ends up accepting Jonathan's orders: "Sí, señor. Iré por mi abrigo" (124). At this point, Jonathan kills each one of his victims with a different weapon: he strangles Mildred as he had done with Margaret, stabs Aunt Emily with a knife, and shoots Williams as he reenters the house. With these final details, even death is a cheap cultural reproduction of all murder mystery stories.

The extreme effect of repetition and (re)production comes to the forefront with Aunt Emily. She is a male dressed as a female who uses a wheelchair to incite compassion. S/he vacillates between a heterosexual male, a homosexual young man, a timid old woman, and an impressionable mother of a stuffed purple Persian cat that is also androgynous (called both Mike and Michelle throughout the play). In an effort to understand Aunt Emily, Jonathan asks Mildred, "Por fin, es lesbiana o joto?," to which Mildred replies, "Tiene un poco de todo" (93). Tía Emily is also an ingenious repro-

duction of sensationalist extremes; s/he will gladly mold into any being so long as she gets her way. This is exactly the same cross-dressing that Bobby takes on in *Una mujer* since it allows him to take on different roles, as critic Sharon Magnarelli has explained (*Gran teatro* 274). Tía Emily even takes on a Lloronaesque cry at the beginning of the play, pretending to cry over Charles' sudden death. We know that La Llorona is a folkloric reference to a woman who cries for her disappeared children. Sometimes she is equated with Malinche, Hernán Cortés' lover, or even an Aztec deity. Here, Aunt Emily cries about not being able to join the sexual play, even while portraying a deteriorated folkloric icon. Despite the architextual connections made through her female Llorona voice, Aunt Emily does not mourn the loss of her children, but rather becomes the voice of lament for a lost inheritance and the exclusion from sexual pleasure. She can be anything and anyone by adjusting herself to whatever situation is in front of her. She is not a lunatic but rather someone willing to copy or replicate another to accomplish her goal. In this interminable role playing, Tía Emily self-destructs because she has no real identity; she is devoid of true humanity. Jonathan claims she is grotesque and kills her for this same reason as he screams: "¡Es antiestético!" (130). Yet it is both Jonathan and Mildred who become sexually aroused by violence and cruelty. As a result, we understand the Brechtian distance Vilalta creates between her characters and her readers. She prevents empathy at all levels because she is not interested in incorporating the solution to human problems in her play. This she confesses in an interview with Lorraine E. Roses: "Mi actual teatro es más cruel, más drástico, no me interesa conmover. He tomado el camino más fácil para mí" (409).

Thus, from the first metatextual stage directions to the very end of the play, various examples of cultural (re)production bare nothing but human decay. If humans insist on passively using pre-packaged, social behaviors as cultural models, nothing more is possible. The four Mexican characters, who share a decrepit English house in London, prove their own dysfunctionality as soon as they appear. Jonathan, who seems to be the most eloquent and accomplished, is also the most violent; he is the only one who clearly defines his desires in the house. Beyond satisfying his sexual wishes, he wants to relive his wedding night and his murder of his wife. Obsessed with murder, he is the most complex and sophisticated character in the play. His talents only serve him as a vicious killer; he has indeed substituted killing for art and God, as he says himself: "Al principio sí, al principio ahí estaba Dios. Pero después cambié a Dios por el arte y al arte por el asesinato" (127). We are

thus asked to interpret for ourselves at what point artistic production becomes vulgar and question its use as a sophisticated cultural expression. Jonathan's disagreement with others' behavior leads him to murder those whom he finds vulgar. He kills Mildred because she is a whore dressed in white, Aunt Emily because she is not aesthetic, and Williams because he keeps interfering with his desires. This is how the play makes apparent the dangers of vulgar repetition, simulation, or otherwise unauthentic, copied behavior. The only authenticity in the play is cruelty and vulgarity, both of which lead to the brutal murders of Margaret and the others in the London house.

Tintoretto's rendition of *Susanna and the Elders* shows a modest Susanna looking at herself in the mirror while she bathes. We as well as the elders are put in the position of voyeurs. Susanna attempts to hide herself from us all as she uses her left arm to cover her breasts. In Rembrandt's rendition of the same piece, Susanna's glance has changed; she looks directly at the spectator, at us, and recognizes that we are also the shameful voyeurs. There is an approximate 70-year gap between Tintoretto and Rembrandt's pieces, but Vilalta picks up on the transformation from one to the other by making the reader of her play, her own version of *Susanna and the Elders*, contemplate his/her own behavior in relation to cultural (re)production. We are voyeurs once again, called to choose differently at the conclusion of the play in order to foster more humane, socially responsible behaviors. Vilalta has shown decayed cultural (re)production throughout the play by replicating Susanna's story and parodying traditional murder mysteries as well as melodrama. These transtextual relationships oblige the reader to reflect on cultural consumption at all levels, from high cultural products such as art to less prestigious forms such as murder mysteries and melodramas.

Although the *telenovela* and melodrama are recognized as formulaic cultural products, it does not make them any less popular. Mildred and the other characters frequently fall into melodramatic dialogues or gestures. Other times, there are sadistic encounters between the characters, but these are also portrayed as behaviors and scenarios that sell. Thus, Vilalta is highlighting for us the destructive lack of human values in modern consumerist society. Repetitive cultural production is obviously of poor quality, but even more alarming is our willingness to admire sadistic, violent, and cruel cultural products as deserving of great praise for their authenticity when they are indeed representing a loss of humanity. Regardless of the refined European context, the behavior we see in the play is grotesque. The danger of uncritical cultural (re)production, whether from high culture, pop culture, consumer-

ist commercials, or European masterpieces, is patent in this play. Through transtextual connections, Vilalta underscores the notion that cultural products coexist anachronistically and multiply themselves in passive consumerist society, whether in painting, music, folklore, or international masterpieces. Furthermore, that mindless (re)production of culture occurs through radio, television, film, and even this particular drama. The mentally sick beings we find therein are incapable of identifying beauty given their fallen bourgeois concerns, which focus on themselves and a seemingly irreversible, collapsed human condition. The circularity of the play points to the repetitive nature of decayed human values and behavior. This version of *Susanna and the Elders* destroys itself; when Jonathan exits, nothing is left on stage but dead bodies. By extension, collective social decay follows what is represented in the degenerated world of *Pequeña historia*. Maruxa Vilalta's literary production began in the 1960s, but as has been demonstrated by this 1984 play, she gained recognition as a modern, cutting-edge playwright in Mexico and abroad for her innovative contributions. Although the various techniques, thematic contents, and symbols of *Pequeña historia de horror (y de amor desenfrenado)* are not new for this author, her introspective dramatic questioning of cultural consumption, artistic value, combined with the dichotomy between authenticity and erroneous copy, serves as a loud cry against dehumanizing cultural values. Selfishness and individual cruelty are represented through horror, perverseness, sexual pleasure, and cheap behaviors throughout the play. Social criticisms that stem from political power struggles, including the connection between sex, eroticism and violence, will continue in her later pieces, including *1910* from 2000. In *Pequeña historia*, we clearly see how eroded cultural values can only produce dysfunctional social behaviors. Thus comes a call to beware of our automatic indifference to extreme violence as humans who consume and reproduce cultural constructs. We are called in this way to emulate Vilalta herself in being dissatisfied with the world in which we live.

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